United Nations A/53/PV.59

General Assembly

Fifty-third Session

Official Records

59th plenary meeting
Monday, 16 November 1998, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Opertti . . . . . (Uruguay)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Chkheidze (Georgia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 20 (*continued*)

Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Report of the Secretary-General (A/53/501)

(a) Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General (A/53/139)

(b) Special economic assistance to individual countries or regions

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/53/157, A/53/213, A/53/291, A/53/292, A/53/307, A/53/316, A/53/330, A/53/344, A/53/359, A/53/361, A/53/377, A/53/424, A/53/538)

Draft resolutions (A/53/L.26/Rev.2, L.27, L.29, L.30/Rev.1, L.31, L.32, L.33, L.36)

(d) Assistance to the Palestinian people

Report of the Secretary-General (A/53/153)

Mr. Semeshko (Belarus) (*interpretation from Russian*): This year the discussion on the question of strengthening the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations is considerably simplified by the fact that this issue, as well as the report of the Secretary-General in document A/53/139, was thoroughly considered in the framework of the first humanitarian affairs segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council this year. We would like to draw attention to the results of the Council's work: agreed conclusions and recommendations that deserve to be considered a significant contribution to strengthening the United Nations potential in the sphere of humanitarian activities. The delegation of the Republic of Belarus supports these conclusions and recommendations aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the functioning of the United Nations humanitarian sector in the midst of the current situation, in which the amount of financial resources allocated for operations undertaken through consolidated inter-agency appeals continues to decline.

The dependence on the financial resources of the donor community is the chief weakness of the United Nations humanitarian sector. That is why we are concerned by the data contained in the Secretary-General's report, which show that as of 15 May of this year the donor countries' response to consolidated appeals had fallen to half of what it was for the same period in 1997. This is taking place during a year when the funding requirements for humanitarian assistance have increased by almost $2 billion. This trend is being

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observed with regard to efforts to reduce the danger and mitigate the consequences of both natural disasters and ecological and technological catastrophes.

Given this situation, the United Nations is faced with two very important tasks. On the one hand, it must increase the efficiency of the work of its humanitarian sector and improve the distribution and utilization of the resources available. On the other hand, there is a need to perfect the mechanism by which the Organization interacts with the donor community and to seek additional sources of funds for humanitarian operations.

That is why the success of the ongoing process of reform of the United Nations humanitarian sector in accordance with the decisions and priorities adopted by the General Assembly during the main part of its fifty-second session is so important. It should be noted with satisfaction that this year the process is moving forward quite rapidly. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been established and is functioning successfully. It has concentrated on the development and coordination of policies, the dissemination of information and the coordination of emergency humanitarian operations. At the same time, the operational functions of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs have been transferred to the United Nations Development Programme and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. We are convinced that such a division of labour will enhance the United Nations potential to respond to emergency humanitarian situations.

Coordination of humanitarian activities in the field and the interaction of the relevant United Nations agencies with donor countries, funds and international financial institutions are among the weaker aspects of the humanitarian activities of the United Nations system. From our point of view, a general strategy for field-level humanitarian activities should be developed with the participation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. This strategy should include the elaboration of a mechanism both for selecting Resident Coordinators — taking into account that they are to coordinate the provision of humanitarian assistance — and for evaluating the effectiveness of their work. It should also define precisely the limits of their authority.

The current increasing difficulties in financing operations within the framework of consolidated appeals and United Nations inter-agency programmes can be surmounted by improving interaction and mutual understanding between, on the one hand, OCHA and other United Nations system agencies, and, on the other hand, the community of donor countries. In our opinion, to achieve progress in this area, the approach to the development and planning of humanitarian programmes needs to be slightly changed. We believe that paragraph 18 of the agreed conclusions and recommendations of the Economic and Social Council humanitarian affairs segment correctly highlights the importance of supporting more development-related activities. The full integration of the development aspect into United Nations humanitarian programmes could both lead the Governments of donor countries to pay more attention to these programmes and attract the resources of international financial institutions and charitable foundations.

The Republic of Belarus will continue to support the efforts of OCHA to enhance the United Nations potential to respond to emergency humanitarian situations and to increase the operational effectiveness of the entire humanitarian sector of the Organization. Despite its difficult economic situation, Belarus has responded to the United Nations consolidated inter-agency appeal and provided humanitarian assistance to Tajikistan. In addition, this year our country provided humanitarian assistance to Moldova, the Russian Federation and China in connection with the natural disasters that befell these countries.

We would like to convey our special gratitude to OCHA and its leader Sergio Vieira de Mello, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for their unflagging attention to the problems involved in redressing the consequences of major natural disasters and technological catastrophes, in particular the catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

For example, in March 1998 in Geneva, OCHA, in cooperation with Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, held the second international donors conference to secure pledges to the United Nations Trust Fund on Chernobyl with the goal of financing the projects of the Inter-Agency Programme of International Assistance to Areas Affected by the Chernobyl Disaster. We are also pleased with the results of the visit of Mr. De Mello to Belarus in October this year, during which the Secretary-General's representative made a trip to the contaminated areas of the Gomel region.

Unfortunately, we are forced to note that, as in other spheres, a shortage of financial resources is the main obstacle to redressing the consequences of the

Chernobyl disaster. As the countries most affected by the disaster are engaged in the difficult process of making the transition to market economies, financial support from the international community is an important prerequisite for the implementation of the Chernobyl projects and programmes. At the same time, the results of the United Nations activities concerning Chernobyl in recent years show that refinement of United Nations programme documents for humanitarian activities does not guarantee an adequate financing response from potential donors. For example, the aforementioned Inter-Agency Programme was developed in 1997 on the basis of recommendations from the donor countries, but during the special international meeting in Geneva only about 2 per cent of the amount needed to implement the Programme was raised. As a result, the implementation of the majority of the 29 most acute and important projects — projects that could considerably mitigate the negative consequences of the greatest technological catastrophe of our times — has been postponed indefinitely.

In this context the implementation of the Inter-Agency Programme should be considered the key element in stepping up international cooperation regarding Chernobyl. We must not allow the Programme to follow the fate of the Joint Plan of international cooperation to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. The successful implementation of the Programme will undoubtedly considerably increase the authority of the United Nations in the international community and especially in the affected countries.

Under such conditions, in our view, there is a need for some renovation of the strategy of interaction between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Governments of the affected countries, on the one hand, and donor countries, on the other. It is important that United Nations information activities be revitalized in order to raise awareness among the international community of the large-scale consequences of Chernobyl. Mass media, non-governmental organizations and scientific and research institutions should be involved more actively in this work. In addition, special attention should be paid to ensuring that international financial and technical assistance is rendered in accordance with the principles of balanced and even distribution.

The complexity of the problems faced by the United Nations and affected countries in connection with Chernobyl requires the restoration of the former regulations of work of the United Nations Quadripartite Committee for Coordination on Chernobyl and the United Nations Ad Hoc Inter-Agency Task Force to Address the Consequences of the Nuclear Accident at Chernobyl. Previously, these bodies met separately and once a year. It is also important to consider the possibility of increasing the number of specialists within the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs who would be dealing directly with questions relating to Chernobyl.

As a founding Member of the United Nations, the Republic of Belarus expresses its readiness to cooperate in a constructive manner with all interested countries and international organizations to implement resolutions of the General Assembly aimed at increasing the scale and efficiency of United Nations international humanitarian activities, taking into account the interests of all Member States.

Mr. Cordeiro (Brazil): The role of the United Nations in the humanitarian field hardly needs to be emphasized. We therefore welcome the fact that the reform process has given prominence to this issue and focused on the enhancement of the specific responsibilities assigned to the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

This year both the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council have held extensive and fruitful discussions on their respective roles in promoting respect for humanitarian law and in strengthening the coordination of emergency assistance. We need to maintain the momentum and build upon those discussions.

In his report on the work of the Organization, the Secretary-General suggested that, in addressing humanitarian crises in conflict situations, the Security Council might wish to interact with the Economic and Social Council, as provided for in Article 65 of the Charter. We maintain that the work of the Organization in the humanitarian field could be further enhanced and greatly benefit from increased interaction between the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, both in conflict and post-conflict situations.

The Secretary-General further stressed that the essential role of the Security Council consists precisely in addressing the underlying causes of conflicts threatening international peace and global security. Securing political conditions for durable peace is indeed the most important role of the Security Council, and this is the best support it can provide to the efforts by humanitarian agencies and the United Nations system as a whole in struggling with

the humanitarian, economic and social consequences of conflicts.

The establishment of the Economic and Social Council segment on humanitarian affairs is one of the most important and among the most visible elements of the reform process approved by the General Assembly. We welcome this timely addition to the responsibilities of the Council. In fact, the Economic and Social Council was called upon to perform the role of a governing body for humanitarian affairs. It is therefore expected to provide policy guidance and to oversee coordination of the system-wide response to humanitarian crises and natural disasters.

In this regard, we are pleased to note the results of the first humanitarian segment held by the Council this year. In the agreed conclusions, the Economic and Social Council invited the Secretary-General to recommend, in consultation with Member States, ways in which the humanitarian segment could be further enhanced. We see merit, for instance, in holding separate meetings of the Council — or meetings of a subsidiary body of the Council — to advance thematic discussions on issues such as accountability and evaluation; the gap from relief to rehabilitation and development; and the negative impact of sanctions regimes on vulnerable segments of the population. Another possible modality could be the holding of informal sessions of the Council as natural disasters and complex emergencies occur throughout the year. These informal Council sessions would serve the purpose of keeping Member States abreast of developments in the field. They could also play a useful role in relation to the consolidated appeals.

Developing countries, especially those in and around conflict-ridden areas, make a substantial contribution to the humanitarian assistance provided through the United Nations. These countries usually absorb massive refugee flows, and they bear the highest economic and social costs of regional humanitarian crises. They also contribute with human resources, training programmes, South-South initiatives and the provision of goods.

The very concept of a donor community in humanitarian affairs, therefore, needs to be reviewed, and a balanced approach to the humanitarian agenda must correct the misperception that developing countries are only recipients of humanitarian aid. Consequently, we must provide for broader participation of developing countries in the decision-making and policy supervision process of humanitarian affairs.

The role of operational activities for development is crucially important in complex emergencies and in post-crisis situations. We encourage the early involvement of United Nations funds and programmes in the efforts to address the relief/development gap in countries emerging from crisis. The development of a comprehensive approach to effectively integrate development activities into humanitarian emergencies is also an important point that we cannot fail to address in the context of the triennial policy review of operational activities.

The Bretton Woods institutions also play a significant role in the overall efforts to mitigate the impact of humanitarian crises, particularly in the initiation of early reconstruction activities aimed at cementing long-term economic and social recovery. As the Charter body responsible for policy supervision of the funds and programmes and for coordination with the Bretton Woods institutions, the role of the Economic and Social Council in humanitarian affairs assumes even greater importance.

It is indeed a matter of great concern that the international response to appeals for humanitarian assistance has been declining both in absolute and in relative terms. The response to international appeals must be commensurate with the needs and principles of humanity; neutrality and impartiality must always apply in the international response to all emergency situations.

The issue of staff security is extremely important. We are concerned about the rising toll of casualties among humanitarian personnel. Brazil is a traditional sponsor of General Assembly resolutions on this issue.

The humanitarian consequences of economic sanctions are yet another question of great concern. The Secretary-General's report on this item stresses that sanctions regimes have a profound long-term impact on development prospects and that these consequences are not alleviated by short-term humanitarian assistance.

We strongly support the work done by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and we also want to commend the efforts deployed in the field by all humanitarian agencies.

(*spoke in Spanish*)

Lastly, I would like to express the solidarity of the Brazilian people and Government with Central America in connection with the humanitarian situation caused by

recent natural disasters. My Government will contribute as much as it can to the emergency and reconstruction efforts in the brotherly countries that have been affected.

Mr. Tchoulkov (Russian Federation) (*interpretation from Russian*): Ambassador Lavrov intended to speak at this meeting, but he is attending another, planned earlier, and I shall therefore speak on his behalf.

The Economic and Social Council's consideration, during the humanitarian affairs segment of its 1998 substantive session, of the Secretary-General's report on strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations revealed broad support for his specific recommendations on strengthening international cooperation in the humanitarian field.

Russia generally endorses the concept of a comprehensive approach encompassing political, humanitarian, human rights and development elements in post-conflict peace-building. Undoubtedly, emergency humanitarian assistance is a priority issue for the international community. The current political and economic situation makes it more necessary than ever to strengthen the coordination of assistance to victims of military conflicts and technological and natural disasters.

We share the concern of the Secretary-General about the downward trend in donor response to humanitarian appeals, growing obstacles in access to populations in need and escalating violence against humanitarian personnel. While there is a need to take all appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of personnel involved in United Nations humanitarian operations, we should be very careful when we consider discontinuing humanitarian assistance where it is still urgently needed because of violence against humanitarian personnel. In this context, we feel that there is a need to adhere strictly to the key principles of humanitarian assistance: neutrality, impartiality and humanity.

Russia has played a constructive role in supporting the measures to restructure the United Nations humanitarian wing and, in particular, to rationalize the division of labour among the actors in humanitarian operations and to improve the structure of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). We support the efforts of Under-Secretary-General Vieira de Mello on such forward-looking issues as improving response to technological and environmental disasters, finding ways and means to involve military and civil defence resources in complex emergencies, and humanitarian mine action.

It is important to pursue the interaction of intergovernmental agencies with the Secretariat, even in the intervening periods between the humanitarian affairs segments of the Economic and Social Council. In our opinion, it would be useful for the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs to hold briefings for Member States approximately once every three months on the situation in countries where humanitarian operations are being conducted and on measures undertaken by OCHA to coordinate those operations.

Russia attaches particular importance to humanitarian limits to sanctions. We advocate the maximum clarity of criteria for imposing sanctions and the need to take their consequences, both for the population of a country under sanctions and for third countries, into account. All elements of the process of launching, implementing, phasing out and lifting sanctions should be legally settled. We believe that further efforts should be made to "humanize" sanctions and their targets. The time has come to consider exempting international humanitarian organizations from sanctions restrictions. Food, medicines and medical equipment should be exempted from sanctions regimes. It is worth studying urgently how to safeguard such vulnerable groups as children from the consequences of sanctions.

It is important to ensure the progressive involvement of the United Nations humanitarian arm in efforts to support internally displaced persons and to mobilize international humanitarian assistance to that purpose. In this respect, a useful role should be played by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the guiding principles on internally displaced persons adopted at the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on Human Rights.

We welcome the ongoing transformation of inter-agency appeals into an effective instrument of strategic planning and comprehensive programming of humanitarian operations and believe that this trend deserves to be supported. We note that the work of the United Nations in the field of advocacy for humanitarian issues has generally become more active.

In March 1998, on the initiative of the Secretariat, an international donor meeting on Chernobyl was held in Geneva to mobilize resources to implement the international programme of assistance to countries affected by the Chernobyl disaster, prepared by the Secretariat in cooperation with the Governments of the Republic of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

To our regret, the donor response was muted. Only Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and the United States made pledges totalling $1.8 million. We express our sincere appreciation to those countries. We hope that all potential donors will express their interest in Chernobyl projects. We attach great importance in this regard to the visit of Under-Secretary-General Vieira de Mello to Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in October this year.

Active efforts were undertaken by OCHA to mobilize humanitarian assistance to the populations of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), affected by floods, and of the Russian Far East and Sakhalin, affected by severe fires. We hope that this work will be continued, given the scale of the damage.

A more active participation of donors in the implementation of the joint appeal of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration for the funding of the Programme of Action, adopted at the 1996 Geneva Commonwealth of Independent States Conference on Refugees and Migrants, would accelerate the solution of the problems faced by hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants.

Russia attaches great importance to the implementation of the United Nations emergency relief programme for 200,000 internally displaced persons from Chechnya presently settled in adjacent regions of the Russian Federation. This programme is important in support of the efforts of the Russian leadership to achieve political stability in the northern Caucasus and to create the necessary conditions for economic reconstruction.

As is noted in the report of the Secretary-General, it is of paramount importance for the international community to strengthen its support for efforts to achieve national reconciliation and to rebuild the economy in Tajikistan. Contributions to humanitarian programmes for Tajikistan are investments in national reconciliation.

United Nations efforts to promote international cooperation in humanitarian and ecological rehabilitation and economic development in the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan deserve support.

The need to resume humanitarian operations in Afghanistan is acute. To that end, United Nations agencies must be provided with generally acceptable conditions for their activities, as called for in the decisions of the Security Council and the General Assembly.

The recent series of devastating natural disasters in Bangladesh, China, Central America and the Caribbean calls for further strengthening of the United Nations potential to respond to natural, technological and environmental disasters. The Convention on the Use of Telecommunications in Emergencies, adopted at the international conference held in Tampere, Finland, in July this year, should play a useful role.

Russia is actively participating in United Nations relief operations. The Russian Rescue Corps and the EMERCOM agency, under the aegis of the Russian Ministry for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Natural Disasters, are working to that end. We attach particular importance to the memorandum of understanding between the United Nations and EMERCOM, signed on 25 October during the visit to Moscow of Under-Secretary-General Vieira de Mello.

From 1996 to 1998, Russia participated in 26 humanitarian relief operations, including in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Tajikistan, Viet Nam and many other countries. Approximately 19,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid were delivered to the affected population, worth R110 million, or $2 million.

Russia actively participates in the humanitarian relief operation in the Great Lakes region. Apart from delivering food, medicine and clothing to the populations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, EMERCOM has provided international relief agencies with trucks and transport planes. The Russian automotive school project in Rwanda, implemented with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Programme, may become a major multi-purpose regional centre if donors will show interest and contribute to its further implementation.

We have a positive view of the expansion and implementation of tripartite schemes of cooperation in United Nations humanitarian operations in which United Nations humanitarian goods are delivered to emergency areas by Russian means of transport. What we have in mind are bilateral agreements on these issues with Norway, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and as with some other countries. We have already implemented this scheme within the framework of UNHCR in the Republics of the former Yugoslavia and in the Great Lakes region in Africa.

The utilization of the potential of EMERCOM in United Nations humanitarian operations, as well as that of other Russian entities and organizations, has proved effective and valid. We continue to count on this mutually beneficial cooperation.

Mr. Crighton (Australia): I have the honour to speak today on behalf of the delegations of Australia, Canada and New Zealand on agenda item 20.

Since we addressed the Assembly a year ago, a number of positive developments have taken place. In particular, our delegations are pleased to note that closer coordination and collaboration continue to develop within the humanitarian community. We welcome cooperative efforts and call upon the United Nations humanitarian agencies and, indeed, the entire humanitarian community, to continue to work closely together. We underline that to be most effective and for maximum impact, humanitarian efforts must be consistent with actions taken by political, human rights and development actors.

This past summer, our delegations welcomed the holding of the first ever humanitarian segment of the Economic and Social Council. The agreed conclusions of that segment build on General Assembly resolution 46/182 and its annex, and they reinforce the guiding principles contained therein. We look forward to the implementation of the agreed conclusions of the humanitarian segment, which provide further guidance for the strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations. Our delegations pledge our cooperation to the Secretary-General in exploring ways in which the humanitarian segment may be enhanced so as to strengthen the role of the Economic and Social Council.

Our delegations share the profound concern expressed in the Secretary-General's report over the increase in the number of security incidents involving personnel of the United Nations system. As highlighted in that report, the routine physical danger encountered by humanitarian workers is a subject that demands immediate attention and vigorous action. In an ominous development, civilian deaths now exceed those of the military among United Nations workers. The growing number of casualties among humanitarian workers demands that we give urgent attention to improving security measures for humanitarian personnel, including local employees. If we are to continue to ask workers to operate in dangerous environments, we must follow up on the Secretary-General's recommendations with regard to proper training, investigation of assaults or physical violence committed against United Nations and other personnel, and provision of resources to enable the Secretary-General to implement security measures.

At the same time, we must not fail to place the responsibility for the safety and protection of United Nations personnel and humanitarian workers where it lies first and foremost: with the parties to the conflict. State and non-State entities alike must be held accountable for the protection of United Nations and other aid workers operating in territory under their control. Where humanitarian personnel have come under attack, no effort should be spared to ensure that those responsible are brought swiftly to justice.

Our delegations welcome the recent agreement in Rome to establish the International Criminal Court as a major step towards eliminating a culture of impunity and improving protection for victims of conflict. By demonstrating our intent to hold individuals accountable for the atrocities they commit, the Court will help deter some of the most serious atrocities and violations of international humanitarian law and will give new meaning and global reach to protecting refugees and other victims of conflicts.

During the humanitarian affairs segment of the Economic and Social Council, we heard from a number of delegations — from countries North and South, developed and developing, donor and recipient — each of which underlined the importance of sound and secure financial footing for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The unusually poor response to the 1998 consolidated appeals is cause for concern, but care should be taken before jumping to conclusions. Rather than focusing on the rather simplistic linkage between media coverage and funding, attention should be given to the improving circumstances in several long-standing humanitarian crises and the continuing high proportion of declining development budgets devoted to humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian emergencies are becoming increasing complex, and consequently the demands on the United Nations system are rising. It must be noted that Member States also have a responsibility, one that falls on their shoulders alone — that of providing the requisite political and material support to enable the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the humanitarian agencies to fulfil the urgent and onerous tasks which we assign to them.

In this context, we want to emphasize the particular importance of ensuring secure and adequate funding for the basic functions of the Emergency Relief Coordinator,

whose energies must not be squandered through a constant and debilitating search for funds. Without predictable resources, it is simply impossible to undertake long-term initiatives effectively. As called for in the agreed conclusions of the humanitarian segment, we look forward to receiving the Secretary-General's recommendations on how to address this important issue.

The importance of coordination in humanitarian action has now been the focus of attention for nearly a decade. Significant progress has been made in recent years, and, as our brief comments today have indicated, particularly within the last 12 months. Yet building an even more effective, efficient, victim-centred humanitarian system within the United Nations remains an important task. No effort should be spared to ensure that the human and material resources dedicated to assisting those suffering the effects of disaster and war are used to their greatest effect.

In conclusion, we want to reiterate our appreciation for the progress that has been made. This aspect of United Nations reform is an important key to ensuring that the entire reform effort succeeds and that the United Nations will be seen by all of our citizens as the truly vital world Organization it aspires to be.

Ms. Montoya (United States of America): The United States is pleased to take the floor on this agenda item, which has received much attention in the past year. We welcome the conclusions of the humanitarian segment of the Economic and Social Council in July. The introduction of this agenda item into the session of the Economic and Social Council gave us a very good opportunity for an in-depth discussion of the overall humanitarian situation. We believe that the Council can serve effectively as the oversight body for humanitarian affairs.

We applaud the continued development of the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as an effective and robust institution in the humanitarian field. We encourage OCHA to continue its innovative approaches to coordinating the policies and priorities of humanitarian actors.

To carry out its functions, OCHA should be assured of funding. OCHA's core functions must be fully financed through the regular budget. We also encourage OCHA to continue its efforts to broaden its donor base for voluntary contributions for its non-core activities.

We deplore the increased levels of violence against humanitarian workers. Kidnappings, injury and loss of life have become too common in this line of work. Humanitarian workers are not only being killed in the crossfire — they are now often specifically targeted for both political and economic gain. The culture of impunity that enables such acts must end.

The United States has been encouraged by the increased discussion of the need to protect humanitarian workers. Both the General Assembly and the Security Council have considered reports from the Secretary-General on the safety of humanitarian personnel. But the international community must do more. Our words must be turned into concrete steps to help protect those who provide aid and assistance.

The General Assembly is considering draft resolutions under the present agenda item about a number of specific humanitarian emergencies. We would like to call attention to just one situation: that caused by hurricane Mitch, which has affected several Central American countries. Efforts to rebuild and develop the region must begin immediately. The traditional development actors should be involved early.

The strategy of recovering from hurricane Mitch raises the broad issue referred to in shorthand as "relief-to-development". Every situation requires the humanitarian community to assess priorities of action. In each case, the longer-term question of rebuilding — development — must be considered early. Too often, humanitarian relief organizations are caught by the task of beginning to rebuild an area which they have rescued from crisis. This is not an efficient use of resources and abilities.

The humanitarian community and Member States of the United Nations must think in strategic terms about the scope of action of a problem and how best to tackle it. Of course, there is usually little time to engage in long policy exercises when we must respond to an emergency. For this reason, we support the Secretary-General's establishment of, among other things, the Executive Committee for Humanitarian Affairs to bring together the United Nations humanitarian team.

It is incumbent on all parts of the United Nations system, and on all Member States, always to bear in mind the linkages between humanitarian and political, peacekeeping, development and human rights strategies.

Improvements in information and communications technology have made disaster response quicker and more

effective. We commend OCHA on the job it has done in this area, particularly with the Humanitarian Early Warning System, ReliefWeb and the Integrated Regional Information Networks, all of which provide access to critical information in a timely manner.

Tomorrow, the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations will be open for signature here at United Nations Headquarters. This Convention will help move telecommunications personnel and equipment into disaster areas. Signatories to the Tampere Convention agree to end excessive import duties and minimize other administrative and political barriers that prevent or seriously delay the swift provision across national borders of emergency telecommunications. These are used to locate disaster victims or assist the movement of food, medicine and other vital supplies. The signatories also agree for the first time to protect relief workers engaging in emergency telecommunications, and their equipment. The United States will sign the Convention tomorrow morning, and we urge all other States to join us.

Mr. Kolby (Norway): We are in a decade plagued by humanitarian emergencies, with the escalation of ruthless internal conflicts and the collapse of State structures, disrupting and destroying the lives and livelihoods of masses of civilians. This year we have also experienced very severe natural disasters in several parts of the world. Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Central America, caused loss of life, human suffering and material damage on an unprecedented scale. We are concerned about the immediate humanitarian consequences, but also about the long-term effects of this appalling disaster. Assistance from the international community is crucial, and so is the role of the United Nations in advocating and coordinating the assistance. We commend the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for their response.

In making humanitarian assistance more effective we need to join forces in the assessment of needs and analyses of problems, shared goals and common programming of operations. We also need to develop integrated approaches towards crisis management, linking humanitarian considerations, respect for human rights and development policies in a coherent framework. We must also ensure that the relief phase is followed by long-term development efforts. We need a broad and coordinated approach to address the humanitarian crisis and the challenge of development.

Coordinated action is important to ensure the efficient delivery of humanitarian assistance. The approach must be flexible and "bottom up", based on the specific requirements of the situation and the agencies' perceived needs to work together to achieve the best results. The ongoing reform process in the United Nations, which emphasizes more efficient coordination of development activities at the country level, is highly relevant for humanitarian efforts. A coordinated United Nations approach at the country level, through, *inter alia*, common Humanitarian Coordinators, will better enable us to bridge the critical gap between the relief phase and long-term development.

We are awaiting an early and unified launch of the consolidated appeals for 1999. In this context, we welcome the fact that the appeals increasingly reflect a humanitarian strategy which defines overall objectives and the division of work. We share, however, the Secretary-General's concern about the decline in international response to appeals for humanitarian assistance. The right to humanitarian aid must be reaffirmed, and the international community must send clear and unambiguous messages in this regard. One important task is to ensure that the United Nations humanitarian agencies are provided with sufficient and predictable funding.

The overriding goal must be no less than to secure and sustain peoples' livelihood, on the basis of respect for human dignity and the human rights of every individual. Assistance and development strategies should be designed to meet this goal in order for local capacity to be strengthened and local vulnerability reduced so that recovery from crisis can proceed. The United Nations should therefore include a stronger component of local capacity-building in the consolidated appeals. It is particularly important for the strengthening of human rights to be integrated into the planning of reconstruction efforts in post-conflict situations and into strategic frameworks for countries in crisis. The inclusion of a gender perspective is also a priority.

Norway is deeply concerned by the blatant disregard for humanitarian principles, such as the persistent denial of access to people in need and the deliberate violence and attacks against civilian populations. The abduction of children, the recruitment of child soldiers and the use of children in armed conflicts must be stopped.

We are also concerned about the continued lack of safety and security of civilians and humanitarian

personnel and the lack of respect for international law and humanitarian principles. We welcome the Convention on the safety of humanitarian workers. The enhanced dialogue between the humanitarian and political parts of the multilateral system, such as the intensified dialogue between the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Security Council, is also important. We would like to underscore the necessity of women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Norway fully supports the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and welcomes the transparent and consultative approach that the Under-Secretary-General and his staff have taken. The Under-Secretary-General should be delegated the necessary authority and be allowed sufficient managerial flexibility to be able to act in a timely and efficient manner in emergency situations.

We continue to be concerned about the funding situation of OCHA. The core functions of the Office should be financed from the regular budget. There is in addition an urgent need to broaden the Office's financial basis. It is unsustainable for voluntary contributions to humanitarian emergency operations to continue to come from but a handful of donor countries.

Norway has always been strongly committed to its humanitarian responsibilities, and we are among the principal donors to international humanitarian efforts. Over the years we have called for improvements in the international humanitarian response capacity and advocated that humanitarian issues be addressed in a more comprehensive and coordinated manner. We are pleased with the establishment of a humanitarian segment in the Economic and Social Council and with the broad participation of countries in the debate in the Economic and Social Council. Strong support was expressed both for OCHA and for a strengthened role of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

We welcome the progress made by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and OCHA in strengthening the coordination of humanitarian assistance of the United Nations. We support the agreed conclusions of the humanitarian affairs segment of the Economic and Social Council and call upon all parties to cooperate with the Secretary-General and the Emergency Relief Coordinator to ensure timely implementation of the agreed conclusions.

Miss Durrant (Jamaica): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the 14 States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) which are Members of the United Nations on agenda item 20, "Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance".

We wish to thank the Secretary-General for the reports produced under this item, particularly the reports in documents A/53/139, "Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations", which was considered by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session in July, and A/53/359, "Emergency assistance to Montserrat".

We have also noted the Economic and Social Council agreed conclusions on special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance, contained in the report of the Economic and Social Council for 1998.

We welcome the emphasis in the Secretary-General's report on the United Nations response to natural disasters and environmental emergencies. We could not have dreamed that this year would have brought so many similar catastrophes, the floods in Bangladesh and China and the hurricanes in our own region being but some examples of natural disasters for which 1998 will be remembered.

The combined onslaught of hurricanes Georges and Mitch in the last two months wreaked devastation upon the two subregions of the Caribbean and Central America, affecting a total of some 10 States and territories. In addition, while we continue to grapple with the effects of the volcanic activity in Montserrat, which has been relatively quiet this year, we are now seeing increased seismic activity in the neighbouring island of Dominica, which since September has reported the incidence of earthquake swarms, resulting in some landslides and damage to buildings. CARICOM countries wish to thank the United Nations system, as well as other partners in the international community, for the valuable assistance given to the Government and the people of Montserrat in response to appeals for support in the wake of the volcanic emergency, in keeping with General Assembly resolution 52/169 J. We pray that it will not become necessary to request similar assistance for Dominica in the near future.

The Latin American and Caribbean region has had its share of natural disasters, which have increased in recent times and which have proved to be almost as

destructive as war and civil strife. However, the devastation caused by these two hurricanes, particularly by Mitch, has resulted in unprecedented loss of life, homes, crops and businesses, and has reversed economic development in the affected States by many years.

The response to hurricanes Georges and Mitch has proved, first, that national Governments will and do respond, often quite heroically, to natural disasters and emergencies; and secondly, that in the wake of a disaster of catastrophic magnitude, national Governments are often physically unable to respond adequately. This underscores one of three important points made in the Secretary-General's report, specifically the need for international assistance in the face of natural disasters.

Thankfully, in the case of the disasters that I mentioned, the local, regional and international communities have grasped the magnitude of the emergencies and have been offering valuable assistance.

While there has been increased coordination among United Nations and other international agencies, combined with local efforts, in responding to humanitarian emergencies, more needs to be done. CARICOM States therefore welcome the enhancement of the United Nations humanitarian response machinery, including the creation of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and we fully support the leadership role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee must also be commended for its determined efforts to achieve coherent coordination structures at the field level and, *inter alia*, to promote at the inter-agency level a clear division of responsibilities and to ensure greater accountability. We agree that the Resident Coordinator should act as the humanitarian assistance coordinator in an emergency, but wish to retain the choice of utilizing alternative coordinating mechanisms, as we understand all too well that the complexities of field level work often negate the adoption of a blanket approach to all countries and emergency situations.

Unfortunately, the hard work being done to ease the suffering resulting from humanitarian emergencies is increasingly under threat from what the Secretary-General describes as the alarming erosion of the respect for humanitarian principles, demonstrated by the increasing denial of access to persons in need and by deliberate violence against civilians and aid workers, including United Nations personnel.

We call upon the international community to unequivocally condemn these acts and to actively begin to reverse this trend. We also call on those parties guilty of these acts to cease them and to reflect carefully upon their long-term consequences, not only for internal relations, but also for future relations with the international community.

CARICOM Governments share the concern of the Secretary-General about the dramatic decline in resources available for emergency assistance, which is particularly linked to the lack of media interest in many emergencies. While this places an onus on Governments and other donors to give more weight to need than to image, it also places a heavier responsibility on the United Nations system to convince potential donors of the necessity to contribute to a particular emergency. In this regard, we emphasize the need to engage a wider segment of civil society in addressing humanitarian crises and, increasingly, as a target audience for educational campaigns about preventing these crises in the first place. Civil society should also be sensitized in order to participate fully in humanitarian early warning systems to mitigate the effects of emergencies when they occur.

The second point which we wish to highlight from the Secretary-General's report is the need for countries to reduce their vulnerability to natural disasters.

While these disasters are unavoidable and are terrible in themselves, much of their carnage and destruction is assisted by our own actions or non-actions. Constant environmental degradation, fuelled by increasing levels of poverty and population pressures, serves to increase the incidence of severe landslips, mudslides, flooding and forest fires. These issues must be addressed by the international community as long-term developmental concerns, particularly within the framework of action of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

In the short to medium term, Governments must still act to mitigate the effects of natural disasters through action in areas such as infrastructure. In this regard, a report by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) on the regional response to the hurricane Georges emergency concluded that one of the most heartening initial lessons learned, in reviewing the impact of the hurricane on one Caribbean country, was that the national disaster response agency had been more prepared to respond to this emergency than it had been prior to hurricane Luis in 1995. In addition, another

Caribbean Government indicated that measures which had been taken to retro-fit and rehabilitate houses and critical infrastructure after hurricane Luis had proved invaluable in helping those structures withstand the impact of hurricane Georges.

This leads me to the third point we wish to highlight, which was endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its agreed conclusions: that particular efforts should be made to enhance local capacity in disaster response, as well as to utilize capacities already existing in developing countries which may be available closer to the site of a disaster.

It is in this regard that CARICOM Governments have responded with financial and material assistance and technical support in the aftermath of hurricane Georges. Assistance has also been dispatched to the affected countries and territories by other Caribbean Governments and Governments of countries outside the region; by organizations such as the Organization of American States and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO); regional and international private sector companies and non-governmental organizations; and United Nations agencies and the international financial institutions. A key player in the coordination effort has been CARICOM's CDERA, which, together with its partners mentioned above, has truly demonstrated the benefits of strong regional solidarity complemented and supported by timely international cooperation.

Similarly, CARICOM Governments have pledged assistance to our brothers and sisters in Central America in the wake of the terrible tragedy resulting from hurricane Mitch. This includes financial assistance, food, medical and other relief supplies, as well as medical and army personnel to assist with relief and reconstruction efforts. We have tried to ensure that relief personnel selected to go to Central America speak Spanish. In this small way, we hope to multiply the benefits we have received from South-South cooperation, as many of these persons have received training in the language in other States in our own region.

This, we know, is but a small gesture in the face of such a huge loss, but our Governments are committed to assisting in any way we can, despite our meagre resources.

In the area of capacity-building for disaster preparedness and mitigation, the post-disaster report of CDERA emphasized, *inter alia*, that regional Governments need to give urgent attention to the implementation of the Regional Warehousing Programme and to consider working with hardware suppliers to ensure the availability of adequate stocks of hurricane-related supplies during the hurricane season.

In addition, the report emphasized the need for regional fund-raising for the Emergency Assistance Fund; the need to examine local arrangements for the integration of non-governmental organizations into disaster response planning; and the need to include economic disaster planning focused on the development of policies for dealing with individuals, communities and businesses in post-disaster situations.

Indications such as these are evidence that the annual cycle of natural disasters in our region has not passed completely in vain and that perhaps we are beginning to use these hard lessons to fortify future generations against the devastating effects of such disasters.

In conclusion, CARICOM Governments wish to thank the international community, including the United Nations system, for the support rendered to CARICOM Governments for capacity-building. We ask for continued support as we continue to move forward in managing the effects of natural disasters, and for continued solidarity with the people of Central America and the Caribbean as they begin to reconstruct their lives.

Mr. Rodríguez Parrilla (Cuba) (*interpretation from Spanish*): My delegation thanks the Secretary-General for his report on strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations. Our thanks go also to the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello. Moreover, my delegation endorses the statement made earlier today by the Chairman of the Group of 77 and China.

The Cuban delegation attaches particular importance to the Assembly's consideration of the item on strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations. We have seen an alarming increase in the number and magnitude of emergencies and natural disasters in many parts of the world. The passage of hurricane Georges through the Caribbean and of hurricane Mitch through Central America left a trail of disaster: thousands of lost lives and millions of casualties throughout the region. The impact on development is incalculable.

Such natural phenomena underscore the urgency with which the international community and the United Nations must improve their capacity to take immediate, large-scale action to deal promptly and effectively with such human tragedies. These catastrophes also fuel our concerns about climate change and the irreversible adverse ecological changes caused by irrational consumption patterns in the North and by underdevelopment in the South.

It is vital to set up environmental early-warning systems in developing countries on the basis of the needed transfer of technology and financial resources from the industrialized world. Only development will give the countries of the South the ability to anticipate and reduce the loss of human life and the material damage caused by disasters. The international community must act to assist in reconstruction and in protecting populations, especially the most vulnerable among them, from the terrible consequences of these natural emergencies.

The Government and the people of Cuba have done and will continue to do their utmost to help our Caribbean and Central American brethren, even though Cuba was among the countries severely affected by these recent natural phenomena. In September, Cuba sent a medical brigade to the fraternal Dominican Republic comprising eleven physicians and two nurses, and offered all medical and paramedical staff needed for a World Health Organization (WHO) humanitarian assistance operation intended to repair the damage and improve the health situation in the Caribbean, particularly in Haiti. Cuba hopes that this initiative, which WHO welcomed, will gain the support of donor countries so that WHO will be able to put it into operation.

Before hurricane Mitch, assistance was offered to all affected countries; three medical brigades were sent to Honduras and one to Guatemala. We are now putting together two additional brigades, one for each of those countries. Cuba has made 72 physicians available to affected countries, and plans to send 46 more in coming days. These brigades also include epidemiologists and nursing staff.

In response to the 9 November joint statement by Central American Presidents, and to help in the rehabilitation of the extensive areas affected by hurricane Mitch, my Government decided to cancel Nicaragua's debt to Cuba, which amounted to $50.1 million. Moreover, 1.1 tons of medicines — including antibiotic, anti-parasitic and anti-diarrhoeic drugs — and 6 tons of rat poison have been sent to Nicaragua. In all these cases, Cuba has absorbed the cost of the charter flights that have carried this assistance to the affected countries.

I reaffirm that Cuba stands ready to make available to Central American countries affected by the hurricane all needed medical staff for as long as is required.

Mr. Alimov (Tajikistan) (*interpretation from Russian*): The delegation of Tajikistan appreciates the report of the Secretary-General on strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations (A/53/139). We agree with the Secretary-General's concern at the overall situation of emergency humanitarian crises and at the situation of humanitarian assistance. We cannot fail to be alarmed by the report's evidence that the continued need for considerable humanitarian assistance is not being met owing to donor fatigue and to unequal levels of interest in different countries, regions and operations. We are also concerned at the reduction in deliveries of food assistance to needy populations, including those in emergency situations.

It is against that background that we must view the activities of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the organization and coordination of international responses to humanitarian crises. We continue to believe that consolidated inter-agency appeals are a sufficiently effective means of approaching this task, although the response from the international community must be improved and must be made equal for all operations. We are pleased that OCHA is working towards clearly setting priorities as a framework for such appeals.

It remains important in international humanitarian efforts to ensure the link between emergency assistance and reconstruction and development efforts. There must be new measures to strengthen the financial machinery supporting such activities. The delegation of Tajikistan believes that there must be a special focus on coordinating assistance and development in the context of post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building. One commonly known problem here is to coordinate the efforts and programmes of all actors involved, including the relevant divisions of the Secretariat, humanitarian agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions.

In this connection, the example of Tajikistan clearly demonstrates the benefits of close cooperation between the United Nations and regional organizations in peacekeeping activities, and highlights the international community's need for coordinated strategies to support

the activities of the Government and the people of a given country aimed at emerging from crisis and instability and embarking on the path of lasting peace, national reconciliation and prosperity. We welcome the key role played by the United Nations in coordinating such multifaceted endeavours. No less important for us is the continuation of our cooperation with such institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in support of the post-conflict recovery and development of Tajikistan. We hope that this cooperation will be further actively developed in the near future.

We highly value the efforts of all States and international organizations that have served as guarantors for the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan, signed in Moscow under the aegis of the United Nations on 27 June 1997. We note that the practical actions of the Collective Peacekeeping Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States, present in Tajikistan for almost five years, have promoted the stabilization of the situation in our country. We are deeply grateful to all our friends — countries, international organizations and especially the agencies of the United Nations system — which have taken to heart the difficulties experienced by the people of Tajikistan and have attempted to lend them assistance to overcome those problems as soon as possible.

The delegation of Tajikistan would like to thank the Secretary-General for his in-depth analysis of the humanitarian situation in the country, contained in the report entitled "Emergency assistance for peace, normalcy and rehabilitation in Tajikistan" (A/53/316). We agree with his view that the humanitarian situation in the country remains unstable and that Tajikistan has special needs for recovery and development.

We are counting on further cooperation from the United Nations in drawing the attention of the world community to problems that potentially threaten Tajikistan and its neighbours with a major environmental catastrophe. I am referring to the situation in the area of Lake Sarez, which is 3,263 metres above sea level. If the natural dam that was formed there by an earthquake at the beginning of the century were to burst, not only Tajikistan, but also Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan might find themselves faced with an insurmountable catastrophe.

While paying due tribute to the contribution of the United Nations to the strengthening of peace and national reconciliation in Tajikistan, we would also like to acknowledge fully that the major responsibility for establishing peace in the country and for the fate of our people lies with the leadership of the Republic of Tajikistan and with the United Tajik Opposition.

We are grateful for the generous expressions of sympathy for our problems by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Gerd Dietrick Merrem, at the conclusion of his activities. We are prepared to develop useful cooperation with his successor, Mr. Ján Kubiš.

There is special respect in Tajikistan for the United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT) and its personnel. These courageous and noble people are working towards a lofty goal in difficult conditions and are making their weighty contribution to the achievement of national accord and the establishment of peace and calm in our country.

The Government of the Republic of Tajikistan reaffirms its desire to continue close cooperation with the United Nations to achieve the implementation of the peace agreements and the post-conflict recovery of the country. We are taking decisive measures to eliminate such excesses as the tragic death in July 1998 of four UNMOT personnel and to ensure reliable security for the representatives of all international organizations active in Tajikistan.

We have great sympathy for the continuing suffering of the fraternal people of Afghanistan, and we are coordinating our activities with the United Nations to provide humanitarian assistance and support to them, to the extent possible. At the same time, along with our neighbours in Russia, we are very seriously concerned about the danger emerging from Afghanistan of a destabilization of the situation in the entire Central Asian region and the possibility of a massive and chaotic influx of Afghan refugees into the territory of Tajikistan.

Mr. Mangoaela (Lesotho), Vice-President, took the Chair.

A subject of special concern for us is the spread of terrorism, weapons and drugs and the threat of the spread of religious extremism. All these factors have an extremely negative impact on the situation in the country as a whole and also on the emerging development of the peace process in particular.

We support the continuation of the coordinating function of the United Nations and the personal

involvement of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello, with regard to international cooperation in post-Chernobyl activities. We welcome the steps taken by the Secretary-General to mobilize resources for projects to rehabilitate the affected population to redress the consequences of the catastrophe that took place at the Chernobyl nuclear power station.

We would also like to express our solidarity with the fraternal Kazakh people in its rehabilitation efforts and in the economic development of the Semipalatinsk region. We have become co-sponsors of the draft resolution on that subject.

At this difficult time, we share in the feelings of solidarity with the peoples of Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, which have so courageously and resolutely withstood the consequences of hurricane Mitch.

A series of devastating natural disasters have recently taken place in China, Bangladesh, Central America and the Caribbean. These disasters have clearly shown that further steps are necessary to strengthen the potential of the United Nations to respond to natural catastrophes and technological and environmental disasters.

We have noted with gratitude the consolidated appeal made by United Nations agencies for the humanitarian requirements of the Tajik people in 1998, which clearly sets priorities and defines the minimum needs for external assistance. We have noted with satisfaction the Secretary-General's comments in his report that despite existing difficulties, the United Nations intends to continue to provide humanitarian assistance in Tajikistan and to make a consolidated inter-agency appeal for humanitarian assistance for Tajikistan in 1999.

We would be grateful to donors for responding to that appeal in a spirit of support for the peace process in Tajikistan, as expressed at the Vienna donors conference in October 1997 and at the Paris meeting in May 1998 because, as the Secretary-General says in his report,

> "Tajikistan could very well become a permanent emergency. It is imperative that donors 'invest' in peace". (*A/53/316, para. 58*)

We express the hope that at the current session the General Assembly will give general support to the draft resolution submitted by our delegation and a number of other countries. That draft resolution on Tajikistan fully reflects the requirements of the current difficult situation in the post-conflict development of our country.

In conclusion, I wish to turn to the issue of United Nations activities in the humanitarian sphere to point out that we believe that it is important to enable the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs — the key coordinator in the United Nations system of humanitarian response — to continue its work by making full use of its own potential and cooperating more closely with all partners in the United Nations and outside of it.

Mr. Izquierdo (Ecuador) (*interpretation from Spanish*): It is a great honour for my delegation to take the floor today on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC) to speak on the item on the strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance, and in particular international assistance for the rehabilitation of Nicaragua.

The international community's desire to promote international cooperation and assistance for Nicaragua had found fertile ground in which to develop. Periodic reports on the situation in that fraternal country show that the Government of Nicaragua, with a long-term vision and broad support from the various sectors of civil society, had been taking the necessary measures, in various areas of governmental activities, to achieve the sustainable development of the population with a view to mitigating the consequences of the lengthy civil war it had experienced and the negative impacts of the natural disasters that, unfortunately, strike that nation regularly.

In this respect, we congratulate the United Nations system on the work it has done in Nicaragua. We welcome also the efforts and achievements of the Government of that fraternal country to bring about democratic consolidation, modernization of the State and the economic and social development of the population, as is noted in the report of the Secretary-General. However, the international community must redouble its efforts to deal with this fresh emergency caused by the devastating effects of hurricane Mitch, which has disrupted all of the development plans for various Central American countries, including Honduras and Nicaragua, the countries most affected by the hurricane. Several years of concerted effort on the part of the international community will be required to rehabilitate the areas affected by that natural disaster. According to

International Press Agency official forecasts, it will take 30 years to rebuild the ruined infrastructure and compensate for the economic losses caused by the hurricane.

As stated in the report of the Secretary-General on this issue,

> "The number and the scale of environmental emergencies in different parts of the world are rising at an alarming rate." (*A/53/139, para. 53*)

United Nations efforts to cope with these emergencies must be enhanced. Concrete measures must be taken, including the establishment of a close cooperation between the departments and agencies of the system that deal with humanitarian assistance.

In this connection, let me recall that in resolution 52/200 and in the draft resolution contained in document A/C.2/53/L.30, on international cooperation to reduce the impact of the El Niño phenomenon, the General Assembly requests the Secretary-General to submit recommendations on how the United Nations will deal with natural-disaster reduction, taking into account the lessons learned and making early warning a key element in future natural-disaster-reduction strategies.

In this context, we welcome the efforts of Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, whose efforts we fully support.

The GRULAC countries believe that the international community must have at its disposal an effective system to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters in the next millennium. This system must be multisectoral and inter-agency and must be linked to the item on the environment and sustainable development.

Finally, the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States would like to endorse the Joint Declaration adopted by the Extraordinary Meeting of Central American Presidents in Comalapa, El Salvador, on 9 November. That Declaration contains an appeal to the international community to assist in rehabilitating the extensive areas affected by the hurricane and to express its solidarity with the peoples and Governments of those countries, who will need to rely on their proverbial stalwartness and resolve to mitigate the impacts of this natural phenomenon.

For these reasons, we hope that the General Assembly will adopt this draft resolution by consensus.

Mrs. Osode (Liberia): The emergence of Liberia from seven years of civil conflict has shifted the concern of this body from relief assistance to development assistance. Significantly, this assistance on the part the international community would help build the capacities of the Liberian authorities in assuming full responsibility for the reconstruction programme. As we deliberate on agenda item 20 (b), we wish to express our gratitude to the Secretary-General for his report contained in document A/53/377, which we wholeheartedly endorse.

The country's political and administrative environment is not as volatile and fragmented as may be perceived. However, as in all developing countries, poverty is widespread in Liberia, and there are incidents of human rights violations not punished by the Government. The Government of Liberia is earnestly endeavouring to address the dilemma of creating an enabling environment for good governance and redefining the role of the national Government within an ethnically diverse society while overwhelmed with demands, at home and abroad. We therefore appeal to the international community to provide technical assistance to Liberia in its efforts to rebuild the country, complementing the expertise of the Liberians themselves.

Permit me to make a few observations about the report. It omitted mention of the monthlong National Reconciliation Conference, held in July 1998. Liberians at home and abroad as well as foreign guests participated in the Conference. During this national discourse, emphasis was placed on political pluralism, fiscal discipline and accountability, the protection of the environment and working for a lasting solution to our problems. The discourse was not restrained and provided a basis for decisions and recommendations, which the Government has pledged to implement as integral components of its overall strategy to rebuild the country. As the report states,

> "By and large, international assistance is being delivered and reshaped to serve as an instrument of reconciliation, reintegration and of general economic progress." (*A/53/377, para. 11*)

Another omission that is crucial to my Government is the demobilization of former combatants. At every opportunity we have not failed to remind the international community that the combatants have not been sufficiently demobilized. Permit me to quote at some length part of a statement from Leonard Kapungu, head of the United Nations Lessons Learned Unit, which was made at the

third international workshop held in Berlin from 2 to 4 July 1998. These words vividly outline this unresolved issue.

> "The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group and the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia concentrated on disarmament and not on demobilization or reintegration.
>
> "Firstly, soldiers were not demobilized. Secondly, the United Nations concentrated foremost on disarmament for election purposes and not for disarmament for peace after the elections. The United Nations wanted to withdraw from Liberia only two months after the elections. There existed a risk that, if ex-combatants are not disarmed and reintegrated, the whole disarmament effort before elections would become ineffective afterwards. The definition of reintegration is that the process ends when a demobilized ex-combatant settles in the community of his choice and generates income. And this the international community failed to do in Liberia. It was a weakness that the international community's interest in elections was great and thereafter the interest in Liberia ceased. We learned from this mistake and did a better job in Eastern Slovenia."

The Government of Liberia expresses its appreciation and gratitude to the United Nations system, the United States Agency for International Development, the European Union, the Bretton Woods institutions and non-governmental organizations for the invaluable contribution they made in designing the multifaceted national recovery programme. Indeed, their assistance enabled the Government to present a more focused, comprehensive recovery package to the donors' conference held in Paris on 7 April 1998. Moreover, the Government of Liberia remains ever grateful to those donor Governments and agencies that offered pledges of assistance to fund the first phase of the two-year programme. We appeal to those who have not honoured their commitments to do so prior to the commencement of the second phase. In the meantime, the Government of Liberia looks forward to receiving the multi-donors mission to conduct an assessment of the requirements for the second phase.

While reiterating the genuine, unwavering commitment of the Liberian Government to national reconciliation and economic recovery through strict observance of the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights, I wish to appeal to the international community to show greater understanding of the post-conflict circumstances prevailing in Liberia and to lend every support to the Government in its mission to consolidate peace and democracy in the country.

Finally, as in the past, we trust the Assembly will adopt unanimously draft resolution A/53/L.36, entitled "Assistance for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Liberia", which was introduced this morning by the Permanent Representative of Sudan in his capacity as Chairman of the African Group.

Mr. Jacob (Israel): Recently, a significant improvement has taken place in the Palestinian economy. A number of economic indicators show that a marked improvement occurred in the Palestinian Authority's economic conditions in 1997 as compared to 1996 and that this improvement has continued into 1998. The economic growth may be due, among other factors, to the relative calm that prevailed during this period, supporting the view that an atmosphere of security and political stability engenders a strengthening of the Palestinian economy. Although in the wake of the recent series of terrorist bombings in Israel a number of limited closures had to be effected, it is worthy of note that in the first half of this year there were no security closures of the West Bank and Gaza, as compared to 63 days of closure in 1997 and 92 closure days in 1996.

The positive growth trend in employment and private-sector activity was detailed in the latest report — for autumn of this year — submitted by the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories. Among other trends, the report noted that in the first half of 1998 there was a 33 per cent increase in the number of Palestinian employees working in Israel, as compared with the previous year. This was accompanied by a decrease of 20.6 per cent in the Palestinian rate of unemployment. The report also highlights the expansion of private investment, as evidenced in the 14 per cent growth of the construction sector, the 12 per cent increase in the registration of new companies and the 25 per cent increase in credit extended to Palestinian businesses.

Income from employment within Israel is a very significant element of the overall income of the Palestinian labour force — 30 to 40 per cent. For some time now there has been a steady upward trend in the number of workers employed by Israelis. While the average number of Palestinians employed by Israelis stood at 39,000 in 1996, that figure increased to 47,000 in 1997, and today stands at about 60,000. Of these,

about 13,000 are employed by Israelis within the West Bank and Gaza and in the new industrial zones.

In addition, tens of thousands of workers are employed in Israel without permits, so the total Palestinian workforce in Israel is estimated at 100,000-110,000 individuals. The number of workers in Israel in 1997 exceeded the projections made by both the International Monetary Fund and the Palestinian Authority's finance department. The steady growth in the Palestinian workforce is even more significant when viewed in the context of the slowdown that is being felt in the Israeli economy and the rise in unemployment among Israelis. This growth in the number of Palestinian workers may be attributed to a number of steps taken by Israel, some with the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority.

One of these steps is the elimination of quotas. The number of Palestinian employees entering Israel is no longer determined by rigid quotas, and today that number is determined by market forces alone. Another step is the lowering of the minimum age for workers to 23. This decision has opened the Israeli labour market to thousands of additional Palestinian workers. Israel has also adopted the overnight-stay programme which allows Palestinian workers to remain overnight in Israel, thus eliminating the need for several hours of daily commuting. Today some 5,000 workers are participating in this programme, and the number is steadily growing.

As far as continuous employment is concerned, a programme has been adopted which allows 30,000 Palestinian workers to continue to enter Israel, even during times of security closures.

In the area of labour exchanges, employment fairs meant to bring Palestinian workers into contact with Israeli contractors have been initiated, employment procedures have been streamlined and job-hunting has been made more organized and efficient.

Regarding flexible hours, the number of hours a worker may stay in Israel has been extended, and arrangements have been made to allow for working in shifts.

The above steps have brought about a significant improvement in employment. This has been recognized both by foreign representatives and by Palestinian Authority officials in recent sessions of the forum of donor States.

Israel has also taken a number of steps to strengthen the Palestinian private sector, in recognition of this sector's central role in the future growth of the Palestinian economy as a whole. The number of West Bank and Gaza merchants granted Israeli entry permits has been expanded to 21,000, as compared with an average of 6,374 permits in 1997 and 3,420 in 1996. In addition, a coordinated effort has been undertaken by Israel, together with the Palestinian Authority, to expand the number of permits allowing Palestinian merchants to enter Israel with their vehicles, thus significantly improving their ability to conduct business. Recently, a number of meetings have taken place between Israel and Palestinian businessmen in order to forge a working relationship between the two business communities.

The continuing increase in the scope of trade also finds expression in the number of truck crossings, which stands today at about 16,000 a month. This number reflects record activity. Also notable is the double-digit percentage increase in the Palestinian export of agricultural produce in the 1996-1997 season as compared to 1995-1996.

Another innovative idea meant to promote the growth of the Palestinian economy is the building of a number of industrial zones. The purpose of this initiative is to create employment along the line between Israel and the areas under Palestinian jurisdiction. These sites are also intended as a means of developing an industrial infrastructure and promoting Israeli-Palestinian economic cooperation.

Israel continues to promote the Gaza Industrial Estate, which is currently in the final stages of construction. This industrial area is slated to provide some 20,000 jobs within its first year of operation. When completed, the project will provide up to 50,000 jobs, directly and indirectly. Israel's role includes, among other things, the linking up of infrastructure and the installation of a new, state-of-the-art cargo terminal to be operated by the Israeli Ports Authority.

In addition, information activities which aim to encourage Israeli businessmen to invest in the Gaza industrial zone have been undertaken. For example, the Israeli Government will provide risk insurance for investments of up to $50 million for Israeli investors. Meetings, visits and seminars to promote investment and cooperation are arranged regularly.

The above steps have generated a significant rise in economic activity, which can be seen from the scope of Israel's transfer of funds to the Palestinian Authority. In 1997, Israel transferred some $540 million to the Palestinian Authority for import taxes, value-added tax adjustments, fuel taxes, income taxes and health taxes. Compared to $436 million in 1996, this represents an increase of 26 per cent. These funds, it should be remembered, constitute 63 per cent of the Palestinian Authority's budget. In the first third of 1998, Israel transferred some $182 million. All told, the total sum transferred since 1994 is in excess of $1.5 billion.

The Wye River Memorandum, recently signed between Israel and the Palestinians, contains key provisions to promote the continued strengthening of the Palestinian economy. The Memorandum records that the two sides have concluded arrangements to permit the opening of the Gaza Industrial Estate and the operation of the international airport in the Gaza Strip. The two sides commit themselves to renewing negotiations on safe passage immediately, with the aim of implementing safe passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, at least on a partial basis, within one week of the entry into force of the Memorandum. As regards the Gaza seaport, the two sides undertake to work towards reaching agreement on this issue within 60 days.

Recognizing the importance of promoting economic development, the parties agree to reactivate all standing committees established by the Interim Agreement. They will also launch a strategic economic dialogue establishing a special committee to enhance their economic relationship. At the same time, the two sides agree to jointly approach the donor community to seek enhanced levels of assistance. Following the signing of the Memorandum, and in keeping with it, the Director-General of the Israeli Finance Ministry, Mr. Ben Zion Zilberfarb, and the Economic Adviser to the Palestinian Authority Chairman, Muhammad Rashid, met in Ramallah on 2 November, within the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Economic Committee, in order to renew the important work of that body.

The economic advantages for the Palestinians from the Wye River Memorandum are far-reaching. Allow me to provide a few examples. The international airport in Gaza will serve tourists, visitors and Palestinian importers and exporters, thus providing an important boost to the economy. Safe passage between the two parts of the Palestinian Authority will, over time, enable the free flow of work, capital and investment between the West Bank and Gaza.

Industrial zones will promote the Palestinians' high-tech capability, which is just now beginning to blossom. A seaport at Gaza will give a feeling of economic independence, while construction work on the port will provide local employment for scores of Palestinian workers.

A smooth implementation of the Wye agreement brings with it promises of additional international economic assistance to the Palestinians, totalling hundreds of millions of dollars.

Israel continues to invest much effort in improving the state of the Palestinian economy, recognizing that this is an important mutual Israeli-Palestinian interest. Still, it is clear that progress is dependent, first and foremost, on a stable security situation, as well as on cooperation with the Palestinians and the international community.

In this context, it is fitting that all parties act in a manner that will advance cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians in the economic sphere and not sacrifice important economic interests to political considerations.

In this speech, I have endeavoured to enumerate just some of the elements of the economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the measures taken by Israel to help promote the Palestinian economy. Economic activity in Gaza and the West Bank is increasing, and it is hoped that a stable security situation, a joint effort to encourage investments, the creation of jobs and an increase in trade will together extend the current upward trend of the Palestinian economy.

In the end, a prosperous Palestinian economy is good for Israel as well, as it forms an important foundation for a stable, comprehensive and lasting reconciliation of our entire region.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision taken at our meeting this morning, I call on the Observer of Switzerland.

Mr. Staehelin (Switzerland) (*interpretation from French*): Switzerland welcomes the progress that has been made since the establishment of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the appointment of Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello. The reform of the humanitarian sector is certainly on the right track and the office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator in Geneva is up to speed and seems to have found its niche.

Switzerland also welcomes the convening of the first humanitarian segment during the July substantive session of the Economic and Social Council. While some improvement can still be made, its current format should definitely be retained and the exercise pursued. During that segment, Switzerland proposed that a comparison be made between the various kinds of coordination in the field in order to assess their comparative advantages in the specific circumstances of a given crisis. We would hope that such a study would also take into account the respective roles of the resident coordinator and the Special Representative of the Secretary General in order to determine the extent to which these functions can best reinforce humanitarian action on the ground.

The security of humanitarian staff in the field remains a matter of concern. Above and beyond the very life and physical safety of humanitarian personnel, humanitarian action itself — assistance to victims and their protection — is being threatened. While the responsibility for preventing these serious violations of international humanitarian law clearly falls first to the States on whose territory this humanitarian activity is taking place, it is equally undeniable that improved coordination between humanitarian organizations, and particularly between them and political or military bodies, would reduce the risk run by humanitarian personnel. The options studied in the course of the recent formal debate of the Security Council with the High Commissioner for Refugees are a step in the right direction. The precise definition of everyone's responsibility, the drafting of codes of conduct and strict respect in humanitarian action for neutrality and impartiality must be the shared common denominators of such action. Moreover, sometimes local arrangements with parties to the conflict can best ensure the security of personnel on the ground.

In the area of sanctions, my delegation takes this opportunity to recall the basic principles which we believe should govern any sanctions regime. First, by its very nature and function, humanitarian assistance cannot be subject to political conditionality. Secondly, economic sanctions should be used not to punish States but, contrarily, to encourage them to change their conduct once other means of peaceful persuasion have been exhausted. Thirdly, sanctions should be formulated in a way that targets them in order to minimize any negative humanitarian impact on the civilian population. Finally, economic sanctions must be designed in an atmosphere of transparency and methodological rigour. They must be implemented under the Security Council's guidance and assessed on a regular basis with a view to making the necessary corrections.

Finally, the devastating effects of anti-personnel landmines continues to be a matter of concern to my country. While we welcome the adoption of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction and the fact that the necessary ratifications were achieved so speedily, we will be dealing with its implementation for some time to come. In this context, coordinating demining action, the exchange of information and assistance to victims remain matters of priority to Switzerland. In that spirit, Switzerland has established the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. Its two major objectives are to contribute to developing a coherent cooperative strategy on mine action and to reinforce the United Nations role, in particular support for the mine action of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which serves as a focal point for mine action at the United Nations.

With the support of United Nations and other agencies, Switzerland has proposed a conceptual framework for assistance to mine victims. This framework, expressed in the Berne Manifesto, calls for a comprehensive approach taking into account all the elements involved in the problem: individuals, communities and societies. The Manifesto reflects the desire better to integrate assistance for victims into a comprehensive health policy. The Manifesto also aims at establishing a coalition of donor States to support this initiative. It appeals to Governments, governmental bodies, international agencies and non-governmental organizations to join the initiative. The process began with the convening of two seminars in Asia and Africa and should lead to a symposium in Switzerland early next year to identify lessons learned and best practices in providing assistance for mine victims. My delegation therefore calls on all interested parties to support this initiative.

The Acting President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 45/6 of 16 October 1990, I call on the observer of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Mrs. Junod (International Committee of the Red Cross) (*interpretation from French*): Humanitarian coordination remains of paramount importance if we are to harmonize our efforts, avoid duplication and carefully

orchestrate different types of activity over time, in a frequently volatile environment. Two aspects of this coordination effort merit closer consideration: coordination and consultation mechanisms, on the one hand, and the harmonization of humanitarian approaches, on the other.

With respect to coordination and consultation mechanisms, we strongly welcome the establishment of permanent as well as field based ad hoc coordination mechanisms, which has become a regular practice in the past five years.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, under its current dynamic leadership, plays a pivotal role in promoting coordination within the United Nations system and beyond. As a standing invitee of the Inter Agency Standing Committee and its working group and as a participant in numerous operational or project related coordination forums, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) voices its opinions on humanitarian issues and shares information on its operations. At the field level, it contributes actively to United Nations led inter agency coordination efforts and supports ad hoc arrangements designed to take into account rapidly changing circumstances.

The ICRC's participation in these mechanisms is motivated by its desire to achieve the greatest possible complementarity between its own efforts and those of the United Nations and of non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, it is also determined to fulfil its specific role, laid down in the Geneva Conventions, as an independent and neutral intermediary in situations of armed conflict.

The ICRC also maintains bilateral dialogue with several United Nations agencies and bodies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as with some of the major non-governmental organizations involved in emergency situations or humanitarian advocacy.

Within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the adoption late last year of the Seville agreement, which defines the respective roles of the Movement's components in different types of situations, marked an important development in terms of coordination. The Seville agreement confers upon the ICRC the role of lead agency within the Movement in situations of armed conflict or internal strife and their direct results, and entrusts the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies the lead role in natural and technological disasters and other peacetime emergency situations requiring resources exceeding those of the relevant national Society. In some of the situations where the ICRC acts as the lead agency, the activities carried out by local and/or foreign national Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies under its overall direction and coordination are an invaluable complement to its own efforts.

With regard to non-governmental organizations, the ICRC has made known its willingness to assume field coordination responsibilities in certain contexts, on a pragmatic and voluntary basis and without prejudice to its specific mandate, particularly when it is de facto the main humanitarian organization on the ground.

Our second point relates to harmonization of humanitarian approaches. Humanitarian action deals with life or death issues for millions of people, and yet it remains one of the least regulated domains of activity in the world. It requires proper planning and professional management, as well as constant evaluation and impact assessment. Humanitarian organizations involved in emergency operations need to recognize their interdependence. Inappropriate behaviour or lack of professionalism on the part of some organizations can adversely affect the efforts undertaken by others. This can also lead to a dangerous lowering of standards and performance in humanitarian action. Recognition of this recently prompted the ICRC to adopt quality control measures for its own activities and to introduce a new way of defining its operational objectives, which should allow for a more thorough evaluation of its operational achievements.

A shared understanding of operations and a concerted humanitarian approach are particularly vital for the protection of vulnerable groups, whether they are internally displaced persons, refugees, or prisoners, as well as for the security of humanitarian workers. There now appears to be growing awareness that this last issue involves everyone and requires a coordinated approach. Thus, following the tragic killing of four members of the United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan last July, the ICRC took the lead and coordinated an information strategy with other humanitarian agencies and with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. This strategy is also aimed at defining the minimum

security conditions needed to carry out humanitarian tasks and the conditions for the disengagement of humanitarian agencies. Coordination in this field thus means forming a common front that provides increased leverage when warring factions or uncontrolled elements endanger the safety of humanitarian workers.

The need to define common standards and principles is also applicable to specific types of humanitarian activity. Difficulties have arisen, for example, in the programme of assistance for unaccompanied minors in the African Great Lakes region, where humanitarian organizations have different definitions of which children qualify and which do not. Often there is also a need to define common policies when the lives of victims are at stake. Taking the example of refugees or internally displaced persons, concern may arise when certain organizations or political bodies decide that repatriation or return is safe while others consider the risk too great to be taken.

A further major challenge for humanitarian coordination is how to manage the transition from emergency relief to rehabilitation and development. In many instances, the gains made while stabilizing an emergency situation are not accompanied by the impetus necessary to nurture a recovery process. The coordination of all actors involved in such a process emerged as one of the major issues in humanitarian aid at the second Wolfsberg humanitarian forum, organized by the ICRC last June. Those involved in humanitarian emergencies must from the outset integrate the rehabilitation dimension into their activities and link up with development actors. Coordination with those involved in reconstruction requires innovative solutions at the local level, particularly in countries resembling a patchwork of conflict and relative peace.

Let me now briefly comment on certain recent developments. In Afghanistan, where the ICRC continues to carry out one of its largest operations in cooperation with the Afghan Red Crescent Society, a major project has been launched by the United Nations in the form of a strategic framework. Following numerous consultations, an assistance strategy has been formulated. The ICRC has been involved in the process, along with United Nations agencies and programmes, the World Bank and donor States, as well as Afghan and international non-governmental organizations working in the country. The particulars of the concept, however, remain to be clarified. It is not clear, for example, to what extent this assistance strategy is linked to the project's overall political framework. Though the ICRC is supportive of the principled common programming approach, it remains wary of attempts to make humanitarian aid conditional on political objectives.

Another welcome development has been the increased attention being paid to human rights. The ICRC has recognized that, in order to ensure adequate protection and assistance to victims of situations of exacerbated armed violence, attention must be focused on all the actors, which is why both international humanitarian law and human rights law are included in ICRC training activities for police, security and armed forces. In this area, the linkage with human rights organizations, in particular the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, is recognized by the ICRC as a major emerging coordination issue.

The Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel landmines, the Rome Conference leading to the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the Security Council's now standing practice of providing for humanitarian exemptions when imposing sanctions are encouraging examples of the positive impact that can result from concerted humanitarian advocacy or consciousness-raising.

To conclude, the ICRC would like to reaffirm its commitment to fostering a true culture of coordination as an essential expression of international solidarity.

The Acting President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 49/2 of 19 October 1994, I now call on the Observer for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Mr. Pedersen (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies): The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies welcomes again the opportunity to share a few observations on this important agenda item on strengthening the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief.

Over this decade of turbulent political and economic change, so-called complex emergencies have absorbed most of our intellectual and operational energy. But by focusing on these high profile disasters we seem to have forgotten that humanitarian work is not confined to war victims, refugees and internally displaced persons, nor is it the exclusive prerogative of northern-based international agencies. Humanitarianism is about enabling

and providing service to all those who are caught up in disaster. This includes the 65 million flood victims and the 59 million people who become victims of drought-induced famine in any average year. It is from this global perspective that I would like to share with the Assembly some of our present concerns and our future prognosis for humanitarian response.

The Federation is deeply concerned about the changing patterns of disasters today. We continue to work with refugees, victims of technological disaster and those caught up in rapid economic and social change. But today the overall picture is changing rapidly. Victims of flood and drought account for nearly half of the 19 million beneficiaries the Federation is assisting this year. This is not the result of choice, but of necessity. Globally, natural disasters account for nearly 80 per cent of all people affected by disasters — including wars.

Today, large-scale natural disasters have important consequences for the ability of individuals and communities to escape from absolute poverty and for the capacity of countries to sustain positive developmental trends at the macro level. This is no longer a concern confined to the so-called humanitarian world, but is reflected in the deliberations of bodies more usually associated with economics and development, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. One of the concerns debated in this forum has been the potential for natural disasters in the South to wipe out, overnight, the economic advances of the past decade, as tragically illustrated by the effects of hurricane Mitch in Central America.

To take another example, the political, social and economic turmoil in Russia has been accompanied by a cascade of natural disasters: floods in Siberia, droughts in the Urals and forest fires across large areas of the country. Vast swathes of fertile soil have been lost, resulting in a considerable reduction in this year's harvest. Cereal and pulse production will be down 25 per cent from last year. This economic crisis will transform the normally harsh Russian winter into a catastrophe.

What we see unfolding is an increased complexity in the forces that push people into disasters and in the actors that both encourage and assist them. The capacity of the State, in many countries, is changing. As a consequence, it has to become less of a doer and more of a facilitator. At the same time, the corporate sector is playing a greater role in shaping people's lives, and we, the humanitarian agencies, are being asked to shoulder an increasing proportion of the burden of humanitarian response.

The unavoidable increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters already set in motion by climatic change and land use change, in combination with other socio-economic trends, has been largely ignored in the more global analysis of the effect of climate change.

Coastal flooding will increase. Hurricanes will become more frequent. Major river systems, such as the Indus and Niger, will see substantial reductions in their flows. All of this spells increasingly frequent and more severe disasters.

Unpleasant surprises will abound. We have already seen changes in disease patterns with Rift Valley fever jumping species, from cattle to man, and killing more than a thousand people within a few weeks in Kenya.

These shifts follow major changes in the way the world's economic systems work. The globalization of the economy, while creating wealth, appears to condemn significant numbers to poverty. Every Government is confronted by the problem of how to provide social welfare services, from health care to pensions, from flood prevention engineering to food security stocks. Without these safety nets, natural disasters will turn into human disasters.

States need to rethink how they can cope with being disaster-prone. Hitherto, disasters have been seen as one-time events that temporarily divert small parts of the economy from the road to development. Yet in the future, disasters will completely alter the development road. Honduras, for example, may take 30 to 40 years to rebuild its economy.

No institution, no State, can plan for all contingencies. Mechanisms need to be found which allow for so-called unplanned action to address the harmful consequences of change: action that can cope with ambiguity and can organize locally to address the particularity of each situation while being guided by international principles that recognize and affirm a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all human life.

This means an increasing reliance on local non-State bodies to provide immediate and appropriate assistance in times of local and national disaster. Only systematic and sustained support for such local structures, exemplified by national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, will

ensure that disaster response capacity will exist when it is needed.

Internationally, we need to reassess how to respond to disaster. In particular, the issue of secure funding must be addressed. International disaster response is kept afloat on a relatively narrow funding base. Annual humanitarian spending peaked in 1994 and is now down to about $3 billion a year, 50 per cent of which comes from just two sources — the European Community and the United States Government. Eight other Government donors accounted for another 42 per cent. Almost all funding comes on an ad hoc basis as a response to one-time appeals, and that funding is becoming harder and harder to access.

Part of the problem is a simple matter of cash flow. Northern treasuries are keenly aware of the growing gap between States' abilities to raise funds and the demands for State-financed services. But the buck stops at the aid agency. We cannot pass on the same cash flow concerns to beneficiaries. Aid agencies now pre-finance a far greater proportion of the world's humanitarian work than ever before and are close to the limit of what they can do.

What is needed is not simply to tinker with the system but to take a much more radical look at how international humanitarian assistance is financed. Two changes in particular need to take place.

First, humanitarian action should no longer be perceived as an ad hoc, reactive and essentially unpredictable business, but should be viewed more correctly as a form of international emergency service. As such, it deserves the same up-front and sustainable funding that national emergency services command.

Secondly, there needs to be more regional sharing of the humanitarian burden. We need to see an increase in the number of substantial donors to the humanitarian pot, and in particular an increase in the number of nation States that demonstrate a concern for the humanitarian crises in their own region.

Humanitarian agencies, of course, must also change. If we are to meet the challenge of assisting people in this complex of natural and economic disasters we will have to work more closely with local organizations. We must also recognize that we are no longer totally free agents. We have an obligation not just to do what we can but to do what disaster victims have the right to demand. We are in the business of helping some of the most at-risk people in the world secure their basic rights.

Over the past year a major collaboration of independent humanitarian agencies has for the first time drawn up a set of minimum standards in humanitarian response. Dubbed the "Sphere Project", these standards lay down for the first time just what rights a disaster victim has and just what standard of competence aid agencies need to be able to achieve to ensure these rights. The bottom line is that compassion is no longer enough. In the realpolitik of today it has to be allied with competence and commitment.

The international humanitarian community has been so busy responding to the next disaster that we have failed to realize the world has changed. What we are dealing with today is the failure of national and global economics and politics: their inability and sometimes unwillingness to deal with extreme events. Humanitarian agencies, international and local, are the frail safety net. The agencies are starting to take this on board and alter their practice accordingly. It would be desirable for States to do likewise.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item. Before the Assembly takes up draft resolutions A/53/L.26/Rev.2, A/53/L.27, A/53/L.29, A/53/L.30/Rev.1 and A/53/L.32, I should like to consult the Assembly with a view to considering also the draft resolution contained in document A/53/L.36, as requested by its sponsors. In this connection, since document A/53/L.36 was circulated only this morning, it would be necessary to waive the relevant provision of rule 78 of the rules of procedure, which reads as follows:

> "As a general rule, no proposal shall be discussed or put to the vote at any meeting of the General Assembly unless copies of it have been circulated to all delegations not later than the day preceding the meeting."

Unless I hear any objection, I will take it that the Assembly agrees with this proposal.

It was so decided.

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take a decision on six draft resolutions submitted under sub-item (b) of agenda item 20.

The Assembly will first take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.26/Rev.2, entitled "International

assistance for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Nicaragua: aftermath of the war and natural disasters".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, the following countries have become sponsors of draft resolution A/53/L.26/Rev.2: Brazil, Denmark, Eritrea, Greece, Ireland and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.26/Rev.2?

Draft resolution A/53/L.26/Rev.2 was adopted (resolution 53/1 D).

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.27, entitled "Assistance to Niger, which is severely affected by floods".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, Eritrea has become a sponsor of draft resolution A/53/L.27.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.27?

Draft resolution A/53/L.27 was adopted (resolution 53/1 E).

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.29, entitled "Special emergency assistance to the Comoros".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, Eritrea has become a sponsor of draft resolution A/53/L.29.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.29?

Draft resolution A/53/L.29 was adopted (resolution 53/1 F).

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.30/Rev.1, entitled "Assistance to Mozambique".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, the following countries have become sponsors of draft resolution A/53/L.30/Rev.1: Brazil, Eritrea, New Zealand and Yemen.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.30/Rev.1?

Draft resolution A/53/L.30/Rev.1 was adopted (resolution 53/1 G).

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take on a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.32, entitled "International cooperation and coordination for the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, the following countries have become sponsors of draft resolution A/53/L.32: Canada and Liechtenstein.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.32?

Draft resolution A/53/L.32 was adopted (resolution 53/1 H).

Ms. Arystanbekova (Kazakhstan): The delegation of Kazakhstan has the special honour, on behalf of the Government of Kazakhstan, of expressing deepest gratitude to the Government of Japan for the assistance it has already provided to Kazakhstan and for its readiness to host a conference on the problems and needs of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan, aimed at promoting effective and efficient international support for my country, as indicated by the delegation of Japan this morning in plenary meeting. I should like to thank the delegation of Japan for expressing support for the measures and recommendations for the rehabilitation of the Semipalatinsk region proposed in the report of the Secretary-General and its annex. I also wish to thank the delegations of the Russian Federation and of Tajikistan for their support of efforts taken by the United Nations to develop the international cooperation aimed at solving the problems that Kazakhstan faces.

The Acting President: The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.36, entitled "Assistance for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Liberia".

I should like to announce that since the introduction of the draft resolution, Greece has become a sponsor of draft resolution A/53/L.36.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.36?

Draft resolution A/53/L.36 was adopted (resolution 53/1 I).

The Acting President: I should like to inform members that it is my understanding that no draft resolution will be submitted concerning assistance for the reconstruction and development of Lebanon.

May I take it that the General Assembly takes note of the report of the Secretary-General contained in document A/53/213?

It was so decided.

The Acting President: I should now like to inform members that action on draft resolutions A/53/L.31 and A/53/L.33 will be taken at a later date and that further draft resolutions on this item will also be submitted to the Secretariat at a later date.

The Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of agenda item 20.

The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.